

January – March 2023

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# I AM THE TRUE VINE

## Part 1

*“I am the true vine, and My Father is the husbandman. Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples.” (John 15:1-8)*

The opening part of John chapter 15 presents some challenges in exposition. There is a simplistic interpretation favoured by the majority of commentators, which sadly fails to line up with the overall teaching of Scripture, and requires the omission of several key words from the verses; and with them, the Lord’s particular line of teaching is lost. This will become more apparent as we proceed.

The chapter is doubtless very well-known, but familiarity often forestalls thorough examination. Though frequently a theme for sermons, this portion is rarely handled with that Berean-like spirit which, with all readiness of mind, searches the Scriptures, whether these things be so (cf Acts 17:11). Many questions at once present themselves: why does Christ liken Himself to a ‘vine’? What does He mean, when He speaks of fruitless branches being ‘taken away’? What is the ‘fruit’ being referred to? What is implied by ‘casting into the fire and burning’?

In the study of the Word of God there are certain elementary but nonetheless important principles to be applied, such as: who are the persons addressed? In what connection are they being addressed? What is the subject, or the central topic? If clarity in these matters is not achieved, the whole passage will inevitably be misconstrued. Coming to the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel, (which belongs to the period of time between the Last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane), the hearers comprised just eleven disciples. There were no unsaved persons present; no false professors; it was not a mixed audience, but believers only. Having these facts firmly fixed in one's mind is fundamental to a right understanding of that which is to follow.

In chapters 13 and 14, Christ had been informing His disciples of what He would be doing for them, when absent from them: maintaining His own people in communion with Himself; manifesting His presence; supplying all needs through the Holy Spirit; preparing a place in glory, and so on. In chapter 15 the order is reversed: there is here a description of what His true followers are to be, and to do, for Him, during the period of His absence.

The figure of the Vine was one with which the disciples would have been familiar, as it was often used of Israel in the Old Testament (cf Psalm 80:8-19, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21); but spiritually speaking, the nation of Israel had proved fruitless and barren. In the Upper Room, the Lord was teaching of things which pertained to the New Covenant – such as the coming of the Holy Spirit to permanently indwell His people. The Passover had been observed for the last time, but His hour had come (cf John 13:1) – the Lamb of God's providing was to be slain. So He had instituted the ordinance of the Lord's Supper to be kept as a memorial unto Him, until He should come again. The period of time described in the Gospels is vital to understand. In terms of secular history, there is a transition from the 'BC' to 'AD' era; but spiritually, there is a transfer from the Old Covenant to the New – and much fundamental teaching concerning this was given in the Upper Room. Having supped for the

last time at a nationalistic, Jewish Passover, Christ said: *“I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom”* (Matthew 26:29). A different vine is in view – not a national one that was unfruitful – but a spiritual one, a ‘true Israel’, the Kingdom of God. Thus in John 15:1, the Lord Jesus utters words of tremendous significance when properly understood: *“I am the True Vine”*.

Now a vine is not a reed, or a solitary stalk. This teaching pertains to the New Covenant, as set out in the Upper Room discourse: it is Christ in His mediatorial office, in all the comprehensiveness of His work; not only as the Lamb of sacrifice, but also as the Great Head of His Church – the Head of the body. In this capacity, He is always seen in connection with His redeemed people – Head and members together as one. This selfsame truth is being expressed again in John 15:5: *“I am the vine, ye are the branches”*. The vine is comprised of the stock and all its branches. This is the ‘True Vine’ coming into focus, as opposed or contrasted to the unfruitful vine of Old Covenant Israel. The True Vine is spiritual; every branch springs out of the main trunk; every small twig and tendrill draws its sap from the central stock.

In view of our observations so far, I do not hesitate to say that the vine and its branches here in John 15 does **not** represent that which is commonly termed ‘the visible church’, that is, embracing the whole of professing Christendom (which is the popular line of interpretation). The Lord was speaking to eleven men – true believers – there was not one false professor present. These men stand as representatives of the body of Christ; what was said to them is applicable to true believers of all time: *“I am the vine, ye are the branches”* (v. 5). Still more evidence arises in the passage to substantiate this. No fewer than nine times in the opening ten verses the word “*abide*” occurs. This word always has reference to fellowship. The only persons who can have fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ are those who are truly born again; those who are vitally ‘in Christ’.

The analogy of the vine and its branches is expressive of oneness – a common life, shared by every branch, all deriving life from the one trunk, resulting in fruit-bearing: the source of it all is Christ. What a contrast this is from the vine of the Old Covenant. Says Jehovah of Israel: *“I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto Me?”* (Jeremiah 2:21); *“Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself”* (Hosea 10:1) – but the True Vine of the New Covenant fulfils all the plans and expectations of the Heavenly Husbandman. The Father is well pleased with His Son. In His work as Mediator He is fully satisfied, and in consequence, all His elect people are ‘accepted in the beloved’ (cf Ephesians 1:6).

It is necessary to look more closely at the terminology here given of the Father as ‘the Husbandman’. The meaning of the original word is: ‘one who tends and cares for’. It conveys the sense of the Father ever watching over, and caring for, the Church of which Christ is the Head. In becoming the Mediator, the Eternal Son of God took the form of a servant; He was made in the likeness of men. How jealously did the Father watch over Him, as He grew up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground (cf Isaiah 53:2). Before His birth, the Father prevented Joseph from putting away his wife (cf Matthew 1:18-20); soon after His birth when Herod gave decree that the young child should be destroyed, God bade Joseph to take Mary and the child and flee into Egypt (cf Matthew 2:13). These, and many other Scriptures, prove the wondrous care of the Husbandman for the True Vine. Yes, and His care and love for the Head is the same care and love put forth to the members, for both are seen as one: *“Thou . . . hast loved them as Thou hast loved Me”* (John 17:23). The Father’s attitude towards the branches is the same, for they are one with the Son, even as the Son is one with the Father (cf John 17:22). Every true child of God comes under His protecting care; His eye is on the weakest tendril, the tenderest shoot; nothing escapes the notice of the Heavenly Husbandman.

Now come to the second verse: *“Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit”* (John 15:2). The first part of this verse, together with v. 6, are frequently appealed to by those who teach that it is possible for a believer to fall from grace, and be lost at the last. They argue that ‘taking away’ in v. 2 and ‘burning’ in v. 6 signify eternal destruction. This is erroneous teaching – which invariably arises when emphasis is placed on an isolated part of Scripture, to the exclusion of others, and with disregard to the overall teaching of God’s Word. What of such verses as: *“I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand”* (John 10:28); *“Of them which thou gavest Me have I lost none”* (John 18:9); *“neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39)? Never must an isolated verse be taken and interpreted in such a manner as to undermine, let alone destroy, such clear teaching concerning the believers’ eternal security, as those Scriptures give.

“The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose  
I will not, I will not, desert to its foes;  
That soul, though all Hell should endeavour to shake,  
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”  
(Rippon’s Selection)

“What from Christ that soul can sever,  
Bound by everlasting bands?  
Once in Him, in Him for ever;  
Thus the eternal covenant stands.  
None shall pluck Thee  
From the Strength of Israel’s hands.”

(J. Kent)

*“Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit He taketh away”* (John 15:2). Recall the principles outlined at the commencement of this article, and the persons being addressed. It was not a mixed company, or mere professors; nor was it the twelve disciples, for by this stage, Judas had departed (cf John 13:30). Had Judas Iscariot been present when Christ spoke these words, there would be ample grounds to suppose that the fruitless branch, destined for burning, had reference to false professors such as him. But these words were spoken to the eleven disciples; only believers. To fail to recognise this is to miss the vital teaching of this whole passage. To say that the fruitless branch represents nominal Christianity – those who are in the churches, yet never genuinely converted, whom God will ultimately ‘take away’ – is a misinterpretation, sadly perpetuated by the majority of commentators. They fail to note the Lord’s opening application, when He says to His disciples: *“ye are the branches”*.

A nominal professor has no vital union with Christ, and cannot therefore be described as a branch at all. The description in John 15 is of the True Vine of the New Covenant, stock and branches united as one, in which pretenders and apostates do not feature. The only consistent interpretation is that verse 2 speaks of genuine branches, some of which bear no fruit. Look again at the Saviour’s language: *“Every branch **in Me** that beareth not fruit He taketh away”*. Those two words ‘in Me’ settle the matter conclusively. Such terms as ‘in Me’, ‘in Him’, ‘in Christ’, or ‘in the Beloved’, are never used in a generic way in Scripture; they never describe any other than the true people of God: *“if any man be **in Christ**, he **is** a new creature”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). When diligently searched and compared, the Word of God will be ‘its own interpreter’.

The tense of the verse is important: a branch is depicted that does not presently bear fruit; it does not state that it never bore. Indeed, it may well have in former times, but has now run to leaf. Naturally speaking, there are factors that could cause the branches of a physical vine to

become fruitless, such as excessive foliage, or blight. By turning to other scriptures, the spiritual application of this analogy will be seen. The Second Epistle of Peter is addressed to true and genuine believers: “*to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*”; unto whom divine power has given “*all things that pertain unto life and godliness*”, and, “*exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Peter 1:1, 3, 4). To persons of this category, he says, by inspiration: “*giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you **that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful** in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (vs. 5 – 8). Here we learn that, although his readers have obtained precious faith and new natures, they are still at risk of barrenness and fruitlessness. In the avoidance of this, they are instructed to add to their faith: **virtue** (meaning rectitude, duty and conformity), **knowledge** (a better apprehension of the mind and will of God through attendance upon His Word and the ministry of it), **temperance** (or self-control, subjugation of the flesh), **patience** (calm endurance, fortitude), **godliness** (a greater degree of likeness unto God), **kindness** (practical expressions of these inward graces) and **love** (toward the Lord, and His people). Here is a perennial safeguard against unfruitfulness.

The Apostle Paul gives precisely the same line of thought when he writes: “*And let ours also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, **that they be not unfruitful***” (Titus 3:14). Although embraced in the pronoun ‘ours’ as part of the family named in Jesus Christ, members of the household of faith must also learn to maintain good works in the prevention of unfruitfulness. This is a heart-searching truth, that even those who through God’s sovereign grace and at infinite cost have been saved, and thus become a branch of the vine, may at certain seasons bring



forth ‘nothing but leaves’, fall into barrenness, and so fail to glorify God. The Christians at Galatia were an example of this, of whom it is written: “*Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?*” (Galatians 5:7).

Look still further: “*Every branch in Me that beareth not fruit **He taketh away***” (John 15:2). ‘He taketh away’. It is not often that I make direct reference to the underlying Greek. However, in this instance an explanation must be given, to avoid any charge of ‘straining the Scriptures’. The Greek word here translated ‘taketh away’ is ‘airo’ (αἶρω) which word also means ‘to raise’ or ‘to lift up’. Consider these other verses where the same verb occurs: “*He shall give His angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall **bear thee up***” (Matthew 4:6); “*Jesus saith unto him, Rise, **take up** thy bed, and walk*” (John 5:8); “*And Jesus **lifted up** His eyes*” (John 11:41). Coming back to the Lord’s analogy of the vine, a picture is drawn in the mind of a branch, bedraggled and trailing on the ground; it is earth-bound; it has become mired with mud. The Husbandman lifts it up, raising it upon a wire or a trellis, that it might get air and sunlight once again; a thought perfectly in-keeping with: “*a bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench*” (Isaiah 42:3). A branch of the True Vine is never broken off; Christ never destroys a member of His own body.

Coming now to the latter part of the verse: “*and every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit*” (John 15:2). At this point, practically all commentators take the view that true believers are here being described, even though the expression ‘in Me’ is not used in this part of the verse. There is an inspired reason for the subtle difference in language. All the Lord’s saved people are branches of the vine. Where fruit is being produced, the matter is obvious, and hardly needs stating. But where there is a branch that has ceased fruit-bearing (when Satan has got an advantage of that believer; as he did with David, and countless others throughout church history), of such mud-splattered

branches the Spirit of God **especially** emphasises that those individuals are still ‘in Me’, ‘in Christ’, all appearances notwithstanding. This emphasis is not required in the case of fruit-bearing believers, with whom the situation is evident (cf Matthew 7:20); but for any who have ‘run to leaf’, or become spotted by the flesh (cf Jude 23), the Holy Spirit is careful to stress the fact of their continued union with Christ, lest any should be deceived into thinking that salvation is not eternal.

To examine more closely the fruit-bearing branch, of this it is written the Husbandman ‘purgeth it’. This is commonly interpreted as ‘pruning’ – but pruning again involves a ‘cutting off’; whereas to ‘purge’ means ‘to purify’. Here, a number of commentators bring in chastisement, affliction and painful discipline as an interpretation of the phrase. There is no doubt that God does sometimes use these means for the purifying of His people; but such is not an adequate explanation of the language of the verse. A fruit-bearing branch is before the Husbandman, in which He sees the possibility of yet more fruit, if correctly treated; and so He purgeth it. That is, not a ‘lopping off’, but a cleansing. Cleansing the branch of a vine may seem a strange notion, but anyone with a knowledge of horticulture will be aware that fruiting bushes and trees can be affected by insects or parasites. Fungus or lichen may get a hold on the stems, and if not treated, will stunt the growth and limit the whole productivity of the plant. So the horticulturalist washes and sprays the branches in order to destroy all harmful pests, and thus bring that branch into such a condition that it can realise its full fruit-bearing potential.

This line of interpretation is substantiated by the words that follow: “*Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you*” (John 15:3). Now ye are **clean**: the ‘purging’ of v. 2 is indeed a cleansing or washing, and the means that the Husbandman uses to achieve this is “**the word**”. Let it be stated that the cleansing spoken of in John 15 is not the ‘washing of regeneration’; it is not that which fits a person for heaven – that is accomplished once and for all through the efficacy of the atoning sacrifice

of the Lord Jesus Christ, the mighty act that makes and constitutes an individual a branch of the vine. No, the washing described in John 15:2 is the continual cleansing by the Word of anything that could hinder or retard the vital flow of sap from the vine to the branches; the removal of all earthly moss and lichen so that more fruit may be borne here below.

To expand upon this further: there are **two** aspects of washing, or ‘sanctification’, that must be understood. In obeying the truth of the gospel through the Spirit, the soul is purified (cf 1 Peter 1:22) – this is a once-for-all purification. Nevertheless, the Scripture also states the need to ‘purify oneself’, even as Christ is pure (cf 1 John 3:3). Similarly, while it is stated that: “*ye are washed . . . ye are sanctified . . . ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Corinthians 6:11), it is also said: “*Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God*” (2 Corinthians 7:1). The balance of these doctrines, and the differences between them, had already been perfectly expressed by the Lord Jesus in the same Upper Room discourse, when He said: “*he that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet*” (John 13:10). The believer’s spiritual condition and security are assured; but still he needs this constant washing from the defilement of the journey, to be rid of the parasites and pollutions of the world around, which often come unawares, and if not purged, may soon become a serious infestation.

*“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me”* (John 15:4). To be ‘in Christ’, and to ‘abide in Him’ are not the same thing. The state of being ‘in Christ’ is a union effected by God Himself, which can never be altered or dissolved. The Scriptures could not, and do not, exhort the believer to make himself ‘in Christ’. However, Christians are frequently instructed to ‘abide in Christ’ – which means “to continue in an experimental realisation of their union with Him”; to be vigilant lest conscious communion should ever be interrupted. *“As the branch cannot*

*bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me*” – the necessity of maintaining fellowship and constant communion with the Lord is still more impressed in this latter part of the verse: a Christian’s barrenness can only be remedied by a closer relationship with Christ. The Psalmist summarises this perfectly: “*Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing*” (Psalm 92:13-14) – they flourish most, who dwell closest to the Lord; being off in His house, and living in His immediate presence, theirs will be a fruitfulness that the vicissitudes of time, and rigors of age, cannot diminish.

“*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:5). This is the crowning truth of the whole passage. A branch of itself can produce no fruit; it has not the resources; it has not the ability. The fruit is produced by the Vine – the branches only bear the clusters. Without Me, or better understood ‘outside of Me’, ye can do nothing: interruptions to communion, reduced dependence upon God, iniquity harboured in the heart, broken fellowship – will cause fruit to fail, and disappointment to ensue. “*For without Me ye can do nothing*”. How needful is this word – especially in the matter of witnessing for Christ. Those who give testimonies, relate experiences, and parade their attainments, zeal, conflicts and victories, thereby fall into a subtle device of the Adversary, exalting a mere branch rather than the True Vine – upon whom their life and fruit depends, and who has wrought all those works in them (cf Isaiah 26:12). God ever save us from such a spirit. This is a most involved and complicated part of the Word of God; may that which has been said thus far be used of the Lord to give a right understanding of it.

**To be continued**

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

## THE HEAVENLY HUSBANDMAN

“*And My Father*”, it is added, “*is the husbandman*” (John 15:1). In conformity with the uniform doctrine of our Lord, ascribing to the Father Everlasting the supremacy in the whole contrivance and arrangement – the whole commencement, progress, and completion – of the method of human salvation, Jesus here describes the Father as the husbandman, whose part it was to prepare the chosen soil; to plant the mystic vine; to graft appropriate shoots into the sacred stock; to cherish and direct its spreading and ascending growth; to protect it from the violence and the guile of the destroyers, “*the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines*” (Song of Songs 2:15), the boar out of the wood that would rend them, the wild beast of the field that would devour them (cf Psalm 80:13); to take His pastime and delight amidst its loveliness and vernal fragrance; and to gather for Himself the overflowing fruitage which shall at last be seen purpling every bough with its rich deliciousness.

In plain and literal expressions, the Saviour here introduces the Eternal Father in the light in which many other passages of Scripture represent Him: as having made all necessary preparation and pre-arrangement for the manifestation and saving work of His Incarnate Son; as having at length appointed and constituted Him, as Mediator, the only channel of saving grace, and spiritual influence, to the children of men; as having united to His sacred person, so as to enjoy the benefits of His salvation, the whole community of converted men – the whole vital church of them that shall be saved; as watching and promoting, with tenderest concern, the progress of the Saviour's work and of His cause – the growth of holy thought and feeling, of spiritual peace and joy, in the church at large, and in each individual member of the church particularly; as watering the spiritual vineyard every moment, and ‘keeping it, lest any hurt it, night and day’ (cf Isaiah 27:3); as regarding ever, with holy satisfaction and complacency, the spectacle of spiritual loveliness which Jesus and His people, united as one holy community, present – all fresh and fragrant

with “*the beauties of holiness*” (Psalm 110:3); and finally, as gathering at last from the whole mighty scheme of union between the Redeemer and His people, with all its productions and results, an abundant harvest of everlasting honour to the praise of His own glory, “*the praise of the glory of His grace*” (Ephesians 1:6).

John Brown Patterson (1804 – 1835)

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“How fitting then, that the vine of all plants, should be used as a figure, seeing that ‘fruit’ is the great theme of the discourse as being the evidence of true discipleship. Other trees may be useful apart from their fruit; with the vine it is not so. Ezekiel, speaking of the vine, asks, “*shall wood be taken thereof to do any work? Or will men take a pin of it to hang any vessel thereon?*” (Ezekiel 15:3). If the vine produces no fruit, it is useless.

What then is the spiritual significance of fruit? May we not say that fruit is the expression of Christ in the believer? We read in Galatians 5:22-23 that “*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance*”. What is this, however, but a beautiful description of Christ as He passed through this world in humiliation? Hence if such fruit is seen in believers, it will result in the reproduction of Christ in His people. Christ personally has gone from this scene, but it is God’s intention that Christ characteristically should still be seen in those that are Christ’s. Christ in Person has gone to the Father’s house, Christ in character is continued in His people on earth.

Who that loves Christ, and admires the perfections of the One who is altogether lovely, would not desire to exhibit, in some measure, His graces, and thus bring forth fruit? If this is the desire of the heart there are three ways indicated by the Lord, to help us in the fulfilment of our desire: first the gracious dealings of the Father; then the practical cleansing by the power of Christ’s word; and lastly the responsibility of the believer to abide in Christ.”

Hamilton Smith (1862 – 1943)

## THE PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY

“...*giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue...*” (2 Peter 1:5)

There is a common misapprehension concerning Christianity, that it dispensed with service on the part of its disciples; that it set aside the old law of works, and thus superseded the necessity of working altogether; as if in some way or other it substituted a kind of lofty mysticism in the place of that plain obedience which is laid down for us by the Ten Commandments – sweeping away from its new dispensation the moralities and observances of the old one, and leaving nothing in their place but an enigmatic system, known only to the initiated few, and with the formal profession of which they look mightily safe and mightily satisfied.

Now we cannot become acquainted with Christianity without perceiving that after the transition has been made from the old economy to the new, there is still service. This transition is signified by images expressive of the total change that is made in our relations and circumstances when we pass from Nature to the Gospel; as a dying and a coming alive again (cf Galatians 2:19-20); as the dissolution by death of a first marriage, and the entrance upon a second (cf Romans 7:1-4); a release from one master – even the law, who formerly had the dominion over us, and an engagement with another master – even God, under whom we are to bring forth the fruit that is lovely and acceptable in His sight (cf Romans 6:11-18); all marking the very wide dissimilarity that there is between the two states. And yet there continues to subsist a service performed – no doubt in a different spirit and in a different manner from what it was before – but still a service. And indeed, it is quite manifest from the apostolical writings, that the life of a Christian is expected to be all in a glow with labour and exertion, and manifold activity – not spent in the indolence of mystic contemplation, but abounding in work; and work persevered in with immoveable steadfastness, and emanating from a zeal

that ever actuates and ever urges on to the performance of it. This is the habit of a disciple upon earth, and it would appear to be his habit even after he is transported into heaven: "*And there . . . His servants shall serve Him*" (Revelation 22:3). So that, whether we look to those years which are preparatory to our entering upon the inheritance of glory, or to the eternity in which the inheritance itself is enjoyed, still we find that under the economy of grace there is a busy, strenuous, and ever-doing service. It is not in fact by exemption from service, but by the new spirit and principle wherewith the service is actuated, that the economy of grace stands distinguished from the economy of the law. We are delivered from the law, not that we should be delivered from the service of obedience, but that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter (cf Romans 7:6).

Virtue, so far from being superseded by the Gospel, is exalted thereby into a far nobler, and purer, and more disinterested attribute of the character than before. It becomes virtue refined from that taint of sordidness which formerly adhered to it; prosecuted not from an impulse of selfishness, but from an impulse of generosity; followed after for its own sake, and because of the loveliness of its native and essential charms; instead of being followed after for the sake of that lucre wherewith it may be conceived to bribe and to enrich its votaries.

Legal virtue is rendered in the spirit of a mercenary who attaches himself to the work of obedience for hire. Evangelical virtue is rendered in the spirit of an amateur, who, in attaching himself to the work of obedience, finds that he is already in the midst of such delights, that he cares for none other in time, and will care for none other through eternity. The man who slaves at his employment to escape the penalty, or to secure the pay, is diametrically the reverse of that man who is more intensely devoted to the employment than the other, because he has applied to it the taste and the affections of his renovated nature. There is a well of water established in his heart, which springeth up unto spiritual life here, and unto everlasting life hereafter. There is an angelic spirit which has



descended upon him from above; and which likens him to those beings of celestial nature, who serve God, not from the authority of any law that is without, but from the impulse of a love that is within; whose whole heart is in the work of obedience, and whose happiness is without alloy, because their holiness is without a failing and without a flaw.

The Gospel does not expunge virtue; it only elevates its character, and raises the virtue of earth to the same platform as the virtue of heaven. It causes it to become its own reward; and promotes the disciples of Jesus Christ from the condition of hirelings who serve in the spirit of bondage, to the condition of heirs who serve their reconciled Father in the spirit of adoption; who love what He loves, and, with a spirit kindred to His own, breathe in the atmosphere which best suits them, when they breathe in the atmosphere of holiness.

While the life of a Christian is a life of progressive virtue, and of virtue purified from the resentments and the baseness of the legal spirit, yet to be set on such a career we see how indispensable it is that we enter by Christ, as by the sole gate of admission through which we can reach the way of such a sanctification. How else can we get rid of the oldness of the letter, we would ask? How be delivered from the fears and disquietudes of legality? How were it possible to regard God in any other light, than one whose very sacredness made Him the enemy of sinners, and so made Him hateful to them? We are bound over to distrust and alienation and impracticable distance from God, till the tidings of the Gospel set us free. There is a leaden and oppressive weight upon our spirits, under which there can be no play of free or grateful or generous emotion towards the Father of them, till we hear with effect of the peace-speaking blood, and of the charm and the power of the great propitiation.

Faith in Christ is not merely the starting-post of our reconciliation with God; it is also the starting-post of that new obedience which, unchilled by suspicion and untainted by dread or by selfishness, is the only

obedience that is at all acceptable. The heart cannot go freely out to God while beset with terror, while vexed with the thoughts of a yet unsettled controversy, while in full view of its own sinfulness, and still in the dark about the way in which a Being of unspotted purity and inflexible justice, can find out a right channel of conveyance for the dispensation of His mercy – how He can be just, while the justifier of the ungodly (cf Romans 3:26). It is the cross of Christ that resolves all these painful ambiguities. It is the cross which dissipates all these apprehensions; which maintains, in sanctity unviolated, the whole aspect and character of the Godhead; while there beameth forth from it the kindest expression of welcome even on the chief of sinners.

Let that expression be but seen and understood, and then will it be to us a matter of experience which we have tried, and tried so feebly, to set forth as a matter of demonstration. Our bonds will be loosed. A thing of hopeless drudgery will be turned into a thing of heartfelt delight. The breath of a new spirit will animate our doings; and we will personally, and by actual feeling, ascertain the difference that there is between the service of a Lawgiver pursuing us with exactions that we cannot reach, and the service of a Friend, who has already charmed us both into confidence and gratitude, and is cheering us on, through the manifold infirmities of our nature, to the resemblance of Himself in all that is kind and upright and heavenly and holy.

It is only, we repeat it, through the knowledge of Christ and of Him crucified, that we can effect this transition from the one style of obedience to the other style of obedience. It is only thus that we become dead unto the law, and alive unto God. It is only thus that we can serve Him with all the energies of an emancipated hand, now set at large from that despondency and deadness which formerly congealed it. *“I will run the way of Thy commandments”*, says the Psalmist, *“when Thou shalt enlarge my heart”* (Psalm 119:32). Make room in it for the doctrine of the cross, and this will enlarge it.

And therefore, to sinners do we declare that Christ is set forth as a propitiation, and all who believe in Him shall have the benefit. And to believers do we declare that God hath called them, not to uncleanness, but to holiness; that, naming the name of Christ, their distinct business is to depart from all iniquity (cf 2 Timothy 2:19), and to do the commandments; not because they can purchase admission to heaven by the doing of them, but because heaven is purchased for them already: and to be educated for heaven, they must learn to do what is right. Not that they can earn a title upon God, but because God has been graciously pleased to confer this title upon them; and now it is their part to do what is well pleasing in His sight, walking worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work – and giving thanks unto the Father, who hath made them meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light (cf Colossians 1:10-12).

Thomas Chalmers (1780 – 1847)

*[This excerpt is taken from a much longer Introductory Essay, prefaced to the 1820 reprint of The Christian's Daily Walk (Henry Scudder) and has been modestly edited to provide the foregoing article. Whilst we would dissent from certain other aspects of Chalmer's theology, this treatise on the rightful place of works in the life of the believer is one of the best we have encountered. The full essay, and the larger book to which it was originally attached, will reward the effort needed to comprehend them, and are commended to our readers' attention.]*

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“And why does he say, “*the fruit of the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:22)? It is because evil works originate in ourselves alone, and therefore he calls them ‘works’ (cf Galatians 5:19); but **good** works require not only our diligence, but God’s loving kindness. He places first the root of these good things, and then proceeds to recount them, in these words: Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; ‘against such the law is not’. For who would lay any command on him, who hath all things within himself?”

John Chrysostom (ca. 347 – 407)

## EDITORIAL

It is troubling to consider, that of those periods in Biblical history which most accurately mirror the present age, the time of the Judges bears so close a resemblance. During that era, the Lord's people are to be seen repeatedly squandering their inheritance in the service of false gods, and 'learning the way of the heathen' (cf Jeremiah 10:2) to their own loss. Long seasons of declension and oppression are briefly alleviated by nobler characters raised up to judge, whose own flaws and failings become painfully apparent, as the downward spiral continues. The thought of God and His sovereignty was entirely absent from the minds of the people, resulting in the situation described: "*In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes*" (Judges 17:6, 21:25).

The closing days of that epoch are recorded in the First Book of Samuel, where the state of the priesthood was replicated in the people at large (cf Hosea 4:9), in a tragic case of 'cause and effect'. The institution supposed to represent God and His truth before the populace (Eli, the High Priest), is depicted as aged, infirm, incapable of delivering reproof, corpulent, sedentary, blind and sleeping (cf 1 Samuel 1:9, 2:22-25, 3:2, 4:13-18). Its principal officers (Hophni and Phineas, his sons) were entirely given to vice, caring only for material gain from their duties, for which they held nothing more than a superstitious regard, evincing their devilish lineage as 'sons of Belial' (cf 1 Samuel 2:12-17, 4:3-4). These things were practically true, and also stood as a metaphor for the spiritual condition of the system. So great was the displeasure of God against the condition of His own Tabernacle and priesthood, that it was twice prophetically condemned (cf 1 Samuel 2:27-36, 3:11-14) before being suspended entirely, by His judgmental hand, through the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:10-11, Psalm 78:60-64), not to be fully restored for over a century. The epitaph set upon it by the Lord was: "*Ichabod, saying, 'the glory is departed from Israel'*" (1 Samuel 4:21).

Another fact is mentioned in 1 Samuel 3:3 which has both a real and a figurative interpretation: the ‘lamp of God’ was almost gone out. Whilst having reference to the practice of lighting the seven-branched candlestick in the Holy Place, so that a continual light should be given through the hours of darkness (cf Exodus 27:20-21), it exemplified the situation pertaining to God’s Word, the light and lamp of the soul. For it is also reported: “*there was no open vision*” in those days (1 Samuel 3:1). Whilst the Law and individual prophets had not entirely ceased, the declaration of truth by them was greatly restricted, and not openly publicised. Only three prophets are specifically mentioned through the whole 450-year period (Judges 4:4, 6:8, 1 Samuel 2:27). And on the rare occasions that the Lord did impart His Word, it was not recognised as such, but mistaken for drunkenness, or a merely human voice (cf 1 Samuel 1:10-16, 3:5-6). This is a spiritually hazardous situation, if judicially imposed by God, for: “*where there is no vision, the people perish*” (Proverbs 29:18).

There is no doubt that the Word of the Lord is in short supply in these days, too. Though Bibles have been published in vast quantities over the years, genuine and uncorrupted forms are fewer. A read Bible, a believed Bible, an obeyed Bible – these things are rarer still. In regard to the declaration of God’s Word (not in the New Testament age by means of prophets, but by the preaching of the Scriptures), there is little in the way of ‘open vision’ – the truth is not heard or received by the masses, but only in relative privacy, by the twos and threes gathered together. All too often, the word when given goes unperceived, and is mocked as foolishness (cf Acts 2:12-16, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 23), or disregarded as the opinion of a man rather than the voice of the Lord – when in fact the opposite is true (cf 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

“*And the word of the Lord was precious in those days*” (1 Samuel 3:1). Most commentators rush to point out that ‘precious’ in this context means ‘rare’ or ‘infrequent’ – but there is a deeper and more pertinent application to make. In practical terms, that which is available in limited

quantity, or hard to come by, increases in value. The same Hebrew word is most often used in connection with ‘precious stones’ (e.g. 2 Samuel 12:30, 1 Kings 10:10-11, Job 28:16), whose high cost results from these factors. As with a pearl, or other treasure, he who would possess it will be prepared to pay dearly for it; he who owns it, will not readily part with it. Hence, “*buy the truth, and sell it not*” (Proverbs 23:23). The same word is also used prophetically of the Lord Jesus, the “*precious corner stone*” (Isaiah 28:16).

The challenge to sincere believers is this: as the word increases in **rarity**, does it also increase in **preciousness**, in our estimation? Do we have a holy determination to secure the Word to ourselves at any price, as though it were vital food in a time of famine (cf Job 23:12, Amos 8:11)? Are we resolved to keep it, at any cost? Even the darkest of times – like those of the Judges – may yet be brightened by the light of truth, as godly Hannah (cf 1 Samuel 2:1-10), and the child Samuel proved, for: “*the Lord appeared again in Shiloh: for the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the Lord*” (1 Samuel 3:21). ‘God is no man’s debtor’, and the lengths to which we may be required to go, in order to have and hold the truth, will be abundantly remunerated. As the Psalmist declared: “*I rejoice at Thy word, as one that findeth great spoil*” (Psalm 119:162); “*the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is Thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is **great reward***” (Psalm 19:9-11). May God grant to each reader the same happy testimony.

*Preliminary Announcement*

**ANNUAL BIBLE CONVENTION**

**Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> & Lord’s Day 4<sup>th</sup> June 2023 D.V.**